

THE IMPACT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS: INSIGHTS FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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1. Introduction

Within the framework of the DIALECT3 project, funded by the European Commission's CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values programme), the primary objective was to address racism as a component of intersectional stereotypes within educational settings. The project sought to promote the inclusion of migrant, refugee, and Roma adolescents —both boys and girls— by fostering tolerant and inclusive school communities. This was achieved through the Physical Education (PE) curriculum, which emphasized anti-racism and non-discrimination.

Among the key research questions explored in the project were the extent to which Physical Education, as an integral part of the school curriculum, can contribute to challenging stereotypes and the extent to which behavioural change can be fostered through the development of lifelong social skills within this educational framework.

This chapter presents the findings of the impact assessment conducted following a seven-month intervention in lower secondary schools across four selected areas, focusing on Physical Education (PE) classes from the perspective of PE teachers. Specifically, it explores how PE teachers —after receiving training and implementing

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a specialized methodology developed within the project— perceive themselves, observe and interpret behavioural changes among lower secondary students, and how these changes were reflected in the final tournaments that marked the completion of the interventions in the participating schools.

General overview

1.1. Role of Physical Education (PE) teachers

Physical Education (PE) teachers play a pivotal role in promoting students' physical, mental, and social well-being, despite the marginalisation of PE within school curricula. Beyond teaching sports, they act as facilitators of social inclusion, fostering respect, teamwork, and acceptance among students from diverse backgrounds, abilities, and identities. By mediating connections with broader social networks, PE teachers enhance students' access to educational and social opportunities, supporting the development of social capital, which Coleman (1988) identifies as essential for learning outcomes and engagement.

Bridging social capital, which connects individuals from diverse backgrounds and enables the flow of information and trust (Putnam, 2000), is particularly critical in reducing prejudice and promoting inclusion. Recent studies demonstrate the mechanisms through which PE teachers contribute to this process. Nasri and Souid (2024) highlight that teachers act as socializing agents, fostering cooperation, trust, and cohesion among students. Marqués-Sánchez et al. (2024) show that participation in teacher-guided team sports increases adolescents' centrality in social networks, enhancing their sense of belonging and bridging connections. Complementing these socialization processes, Ribeiro, Farias, and Mesquita (2024) demonstrate that equity-driven pedagogical scaffolding further reduces participation disparities by adapting instruction to students' individual strengths, promoting fairness and engagement for all.

In parallel, the development of basic physical competence through high-quality PE programmes enhances students' self-esteem, confidence, and peer acceptance (Bailey, 2005), providing

a foundation for meaningful social engagement. Such outcomes are vital for fostering inclusive environments where all students feel valued and motivated to participate. By collaborating with families, the school community, and local organizations, PE teachers extend students' social networks and access to resources that support both personal growth and social inclusion. Ultimately, their work demonstrates that PE contributes far beyond physical skill development, serving as a key arena for promoting equity and building social capital.

1.2. Polarization, differentiated teaching in PE and football

Differentiated teaching in PE allows for flexible instructional methods, enabling students to develop their skills individually. By focusing on personal strengths, students can be better prepared to integrate into groups where they can perform effectively. This approach fosters an inclusive environment where all students, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to succeed. Additionally, adapting rules in collegiate sports can promote gender equality by ensuring fair access to resources, facilities, and opportunities for all participants.

To counter the rise of phenomena —where populist groups shape adolescents' identity during periods of social and political polarization by reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices that may influence how they perceive and act upon the world— experience has shown that fostering greater inclusion and tolerance within communities can lead to more effective governance of diversity and strengthen societies against violent extremism (United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

The use of sport as an intervention to reduce intolerance, racist violence and crime in the community and to reduce radicalisation of young adults has become a common practice. Studies suggest that participating in sport may improve self-esteem, enhance social bonds and provide participants with a feeling of purpose (Council of the European Union 2018, Radicalization Awareness Network –RAN, 2021).

Also, research indicates that football can disrupt societal polarization by leveraging the transformative power of sports to

alter perceptions, challenge prejudices, and enhance behaviours. Sports can break down racial and political barriers, promote gender equality, and combat discrimination. In fostering mutual respect and tolerance, sports impart essential social and interpersonal skills (UNESCO, 2018). Utilizing sports as a tool for youth development has proven effective in steering young individuals away from antisocial behaviour, violence, crime, and substance abuse.

To this respect, football3, as an alternative model of football, targets to promoting key life skills and empowering youth to become leaders, as well as to providing both players and mediators with knowledge and life skills (football3 Handbook, 2024). It aims not only to increase willingness to include others, regardless of gender, ability, age or background, increase communication, decision-making and conflict-mediation skills, improve respect for women and girls, and appreciation of gender equality, enhance a sense of fair play, responsibility and accountability, increase desire to become a role model for others and increase participation in the community, but also to increase social participation.

2. Overview of project processes during the pilot phase

During the pilot testing phase, the project's activities focused on enhancing the pedagogical and educational approaches of participating PE teachers by adopting the DIALECT methodology into school curricula, for a specific period (7 months), and utilizing the educational scenarios developed throughout the project's activities and football3. These efforts targeted lower secondary school students (aged 12-15) in four selected intervention areas.¹

Within the context of physical education classes in the intervention schools, the project aimed to support vulnerable adolescents in improving their multicultural understanding and sense of belonging

1. The selection of intervention areas was based on socioeconomic characteristics, as well as criteria related to accessibility and network availability. Schools were selected from two urban areas (Athens and Thessaloniki) and two rural areas (the prefectures of Evia and Thesprotia).

within the school environment, fostering intercultural bonds with their peers. Specifically, through the principles of football³ and the experiential learning activities introduced in the educational scenarios, the project emphasized the development of a sense of belonging, alongside the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination in the school setting.

These activities culminated in the organization of local football³ tournaments in each intervention area, where participating teams were mixed in terms of both gender and school affiliation, with the primary objective of promoting fair play.

Furthermore, the intervention's impact was assessed through a comprehensive evaluation, employing a multifaceted approach that combined qualitative and quantitative assessment tools, providing an in-depth understanding of the initiative's effectiveness.

3. Impact assessment research: objective and methodology

3.1. The objectives

The impact assessment research aimed to evaluate learning outcomes related to the project's activities, assess its influence on trained PE teachers and adolescents—focusing on behavioural change, tolerance, and non-discrimination—and analyze pre- and post-intervention data while ensuring gender mainstreaming.

For PE teachers, the study explored their role as agents of behavioural change through the adoption of the DIALECT³ methodology. Research questions were designed to examine the challenges educators face regarding racism and discrimination in schools, their existing strategies for addressing such issues, and the impact of DIALECT³ on their approach (Tsiganou and Vezyrgianni, 2024).

3.2. Research tools

As mentioned above, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to measure the impact of Physical Education (PE)

and football programmes in promoting inclusion, tolerance, and non-discrimination among students. Accordingly, two distinct questionnaires were designed for self-completion by PE teachers implementing DIALECT3 activities in schools across the four areas, before and after the students' training phase. The aim was to assess the improvement in competencies and empowerment practices that foster tolerance, social inclusion, and behavioural change.

In the first questionnaire, administered before the start of the pilot testing phase, PE teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale regarding various aspects of students' behaviour in their classes. These included participation in group activities, the presence of discriminatory behaviours, and their perspectives on inclusivity and the promotion of tolerance through physical education. Additionally, teachers were asked about their views on using educational scenarios or interventions to foster tolerance and inclusivity in PE lessons.

The second questionnaire, distributed to participating teachers upon completion of the pilot testing period, aimed to assess their experience with implementing the football3 methodology alongside the developed educational scenarios. Using a 3-point scale, teachers indicated their level of agreement on various aspects of the intervention. The questionnaire covered their satisfaction with the project, the extent to which it met their expectations and their observations of students' behavioural change. Particular emphasis was placed on the potential strengthening of students' teamwork skills, acceptance of diversity, cooperation, tolerance, and resilience against discriminatory behaviours.

In this context, a qualitative study was also conducted using a focus group technique involving PE teachers implementing DIALECT3 activities, particularly the football3 methodology, in the schools of the four intervention areas. Additionally, an observation and impression-decoding technique was applied to capture the views, experiences, and insights expressed by PE teachers during ongoing mentoring sessions conducted throughout the pilot testing phase.

4. Outcomes in the four intervention areas: pe teachers' views

4.1. Findings from quantitative data analysis

A total of 14 PE teachers in lower secondary schools across the four intervention areas of the project (i.e., two schools in Athens, five in Evia, three in Thesprotia, and four in Thessaloniki) responded to the first questionnaire, i.e. before pilot testing phase.

When asked about students' behaviour in their schools, the majority of teachers acknowledged that adolescents tend to avoid participating in group activities within the classroom and the broader school community to some extent. Additionally, most respondents reported having observed some or minor instances of discriminatory behaviour among students—based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or disability—either in class or in school life. Only a few teachers characterized such behaviours as widespread within their schools.

Although the vast majority of teachers participating in the project's intervention believed that the PE course provides a strong opportunity to promote tolerance, diversity, and anti-discrimination through its activities, fewer than half reported frequently incorporating educational scenarios for this purpose in their lessons. Instead, most teachers stated that such scenarios were used only occasionally or minimally in their classes. Regarding the effectiveness of these interventions, half of the teachers considered the applied scenarios to have had a significant positive impact on promoting tolerance, inclusion, and non-discrimination among students. The remaining half, however, felt that while the interventions had some positive effects, their impact was more limited.

Upon the completion of the pilot testing phase—namely, the adoption of the football3 methodology and the integration of the developed educational scenarios into school curricula, with a particular focus on Physical Education (PE) courses—13 PE teachers from the participating schools in the four intervention areas (i.e., two schools in Athens, five in Evia, two in Thesprotia, and four in Thessaloniki) responded to the second questionnaire.

The vast majority of respondents reported a high level of satisfaction with the project's activities during the pilot testing phase. Furthermore, they indicated that their expectations had been largely met through their engagement with these activities. Overall, most teachers perceived the project's intervention as having made a significant contribution to promoting equality, fostering inclusion, and addressing discrimination among their students.

With regard to the specific contributions of the DIALECT3 activities, the majority of respondents asserted that these activities played a crucial role in enhancing students' teamwork skills. Similarly, most participating teachers concurred that the intervention substantially strengthened students' ability to collaborate and demonstrate mutual respect. However, a smaller proportion of teachers —just over half— indicated that the implementation of the football3 methodology and the use of the teaching scenarios had a considerable impact on fostering students' acceptance of diversity. The remaining teachers were less convinced, suggesting that while these activities had some positive influence, their overall contribution was more moderate.

Through students' participation in mixed football teams, two-thirds of the teachers reported that the sense of belonging among students of migrant origin was significantly enhanced. In contrast, the remaining teachers were more hesitant, indicating that this factor contributed only to a limited extent.

A similar trend is observed regarding gender equality through the implementation of educational scenarios and participation in football3 games. Specifically, two-thirds of the teachers reported that gender equality was significantly reinforced, while the remaining teachers indicated that this was achieved only to a limited extent within their classes.

A comparable pattern emerged concerning students' resilience in addressing racist comments and behaviours. More than two-thirds of the teachers stated that, upon completion of the pilot testing phase, students had developed significantly greater resilience in confronting such issues. In contrast, less than one-third of the teachers believed that the intervention contributed only moderately to strengthening students' resilience in responding to racist remarks and behaviours.

Finally, more than half of the teachers who participated in the project's intervention activities perceived a significant enhancement in students' social skills across various aspects of their lives. These included increased opportunities for self-expression and a stronger sense of personal progress in both their academic and personal development. In contrast, the remaining teachers believed that such improvements were achieved only to a limited extent upon the completion of the pilot testing phase.

4.2. Mentoring PE teachers during the pilot phase: challenges, reflections, and key insights

To ensure the smooth implementation of the pilot phase, three monthly mentoring sessions² were conducted among project partners and PE teachers implementing the football3 methodology in schools. These sessions addressed challenges encountered in the course of the pilot phase, proposed solutions, and examined early behavioural changes in adolescents resulting from the educational scenarios and football3 methodology.

Initially, teachers expressed concerns about overcoming entrenched stereotypes in football as a male-dominated sport, as well as practical issues such as team formation and scheduling constraints. They debated optimal group sizes, leadership roles, and whether team compositions should remain fixed, with many emphasizing the need to avoid the perception that team formation was imposed by teachers. It soon became clear that successful implementation required heterogeneous, leaderless groups with balanced dynamics to foster inclusivity and prevent discouragement among children with varying skill levels. While this approach did not fully align with the expectations of football academy students focused on competition, the project prioritized inclusion and collaboration across gender, background, and ability. Despite occasional challenges, educators remained committed to integrating the football3 methodology.

2. A Monitoring Team was established to support the trained PE teachers with the application of the project's methodology.

Time constraints emerged as a significant issue, with limited PE hours and shortened class periods leading to rushed implementation. Teachers found it difficult to introduce new rules and complete the football3 process, often neglecting the provided teaching scenarios due to insufficient time.

Another concern was the mediator role —whether it should be assigned to a single student or rotated. Mediators were often perceived as biased, facing resistance or attempts to undermine their authority, though interest in the role increased over time. Teachers also observed excessive self-centeredness among adolescents, sometimes manifesting as aggression or rule-breaking. Gender dynamics remained a challenge, as girls feared exclusion and discrimination, while boys prioritized competition over collaboration, often sidelining weaker players.

Teachers recognized their own need to shift mindsets, acknowledging that they, too, internalized societal norms emphasizing winning. Substitute teachers faced additional difficulties due to frequent rotations, disrupting methodological continuity. While football3's flexibility allowed for adaptation, self-exclusion persisted, particularly among students with low self-esteem who feared peer criticism.

Despite these challenges, the project fostered positive behavioural changes. Initially hesitant —especially girls— students became more engaged, with girls gaining confidence and boys demonstrating greater inclusivity and cooperation. However, while gender-based exclusion decreased, ability-based discrimination persisted.

Overall, teamwork improved, with fewer instances of individualistic play. Adolescents gradually understood that success required adherence to rules, and participation in football3 encouraged responsibility and fair play, particularly among previously aggressive students.

To enhance effectiveness, it was suggested that football3 be implemented within a standardized framework with consistent rules. Additionally, introducing the methodology in primary schools could help instill cooperative attitudes from an early age, reinforcing inclusion and gender equality.

4.3. Understanding PE challenges and opportunities: focus group findings

As previously mentioned additional qualitative data were gathered through a focus group discussion with PE teachers after completion of the pilot testing phase. In total, ten (10) PE teachers from schools located in the four intervention areas (Athens, Thessaloniki, Evia, and Thesprotia) participated in the discussion. The focus group was aimed at having in-depth feedback from participants on the two key dimensions: benefits accruing to the PE teacher and changes in their perception of stereotypes and modification in their educational approach post-piloting along with changes observed at the student level after the intervention. In specific terms, this finding, implicitly, is supporting the issues and challenges identified during the mentoring sessions.

4.3.1. For PE teachers: skill development and implementation challenges

From the outset, PE teachers admitted that the project, through its teaching scenarios and football³ sessions, significantly improved their skills. They were provided with key resources to enable them to manage critical issues concerning gender relations in the school environment. In return, this project opened up several alternative methods for teaching football to them, diversified their instructional methods, and brought new perspectives to the teaching of physical education.

One of the major challenges encountered was the time constraint. Physical Education classes were just two hours a week, and trying to fit all three game periods into the weekly schedule proved to be difficult. In some schools, the students were not very cooperative because they viewed the structured nature of the programme to restrict their spontaneity. The teachers faced problems trying to get students with a variety of characters to fit in as quickly as those who generally have difficulties sticking to any rule.

Stereotypes and discrimination presented more academic challenges. Understanding that the project intended to break down

gender and ability-based biases, one can see how many students, as usual, held stereotypical notions concerning gender roles in sports. In fact, the boys were very unwilling to include the girls in the game, and so, too, were the girls about playing alongside the boys. Such initial resistance only highlighted the gravity of changing long-established attitudes. Moreover, it was difficult for the students, especially the potential future professional players toeing the line with old, traditional football, to adjust their gaming approach to the innovations of football3.

The obstacles notwithstanding, the project proves engaging and contributes to inclusion in the future. Reports from teachers who used the teaching scenarios indicated that structured activities proved very effective in introducing the principles of the game in an engaging and reachable way. One of the scenarios, which involved the distribution of privilege through a variation of football based on preferential treatment using a handkerchief, became very popular. The students not only wanted to use the activity for relaxation but also requested to be repeated. On the whole, the scenarios were perceived to be well-designed, thus instrumental in creating an atmosphere where students could participate energetically and delve deep into the objectives of the project.

4.3.2. Enhancing the programme: training, communication, and long-term integration

There were several improvements that PE teachers came up with to further strengthen the impact and sustainability of the project. One major proposal was to incorporate the programme into the curricula of universities, which would ensure that future teachers of physical education went through the football3 methodology and applied it in their practice as well. A wider, more sustainable approach was to expand the methodology to other sports because easily adaptable principles exist beyond football, though the methodology can also be applied to other sports. The teachers also demanded that school championships be re-established through football3 tournaments, which would also increase the involvement of students and ensure their participation.

In light of the positive results of the project, the vast majority of the teachers were very willing to feature it in their work for the next academic year in the annual curriculum and apply it further beyond football. Yet, they also noticed that this should be accompanied by some other effort of stability and constant support because such initiatives were often fragmented in the recent past.

4.3.3. Regarding students

4.3.3.1. Students' reactions to DIALECT3's innovative approach

The students' first reactions to the new methodology ranged from those who welcomed the change to female students who were hesitant because of preconceived notions. On the basis of age or grade as well as gender, first-grade students were the most willing and involved while third-grade ones initially exhibited some resistance, particularly where girls' participation and conformity to the team rules were concerned. The latter may be a result of the prolonged exposure of these students to stereotypes and conventional representations of the game of football. Second-grade students showed initial resistance but became more involved when they understood the objectives of the project better. These findings align with quantitative data, which reflect similar patterns.

4.3.3.2. Behavioural shifts in equality, diversity, and inclusion

Teachers unanimously agreed that it was DIALECT3 that had effectively triggered equality and diversity. There were quite eminent behavioural changes among the students. The most significant change occurred between the two sexes. Initially, there were attitudinal differences when boys would ostracize girls, who would also not want to be associated with boys due to negative responses or rough games. With time, such barriers were removed and boys began helping and cooperating with the girls instead of excluding them. What is more, good male players cooperated actively with female students, indicating a changed attitude.

Although most schools lacked significant racial diversity, the project notably facilitated the inclusion of Roma children, ensuring

universal participation without issues. It went further to break stereotypes with DIALECT3 motivating students into an approach other than a win-at-all-costs, through the introduction of alternative roles such as mediators. It is these students who advance the necessary valuable conflict resolution and fairness skills, and all of them adjust the rules wherein that kind of activity has generated a real sense of them having some degree of influence and empowerment.

The project's impact was most evident during the final tournament, where students from different schools and backgrounds were blended into single teams. This reinforced the values of teamwork, collaboration, and inclusion, further solidifying the project's success in promoting equality.

4.3.3.3. Benefits of the intervention for students

The key advantage of the intervention amounts to an emphasis on acceptance and empowerment irrespective of ability or gender differences among students—in short, the setting of football apart from the earlier ways of doing things. By shifting the focus from winning to teamwork, diversity, and belonging, the programme fosters an inclusive environment. The students themselves change the rules actively and undertake mediator responsibilities and thus imbibe conflict resolution, communication, and responsibility skills, which are the very keys to character-building important areas for learning. These lessons are reinforced through interschool tournaments, where mixed teams collaborate, further strengthening social bonds.

The project increased student engagement with rules and cooperative behaviours. Male students became more supportive of their female peers and the females had much gain in confidence because they were very reserved at first. One teacher observed:

“I witnessed a remarkable shift in girls’ attitudes. They became more willing to play with boys, despite concerns about negative comments. Surprisingly, even my top soccer players showed exceptional cooperation with the girls, driven by their shared love for the sport”.

While another teacher pointed out a major transformation in the following response:

“A single student was a hold-out, stating that the project would not coincide with how he saw football. He often was on the fringes and would prefer to work by himself with two other students. However, as he fathomed the concepts behind the project, his point of view changed. He would even open up to a reporter when we were at the matches and I couldn’t believe the depth of his insights”.

In addition to the competition that took place at the final tournaments, students who came from different schools also made valuable friendships. Even their teachers witnessed how, indeed, the students had developed a spirit of friendly rivalry, team play, and mutual support, rather than enmity. One particular teacher had this to say about the tournament held in Evia:

“Teams weren’t divided by school, gender, age, or grade. Instead, students played alongside unfamiliar peers, yet they collaborated seamlessly. They even helped clean up afterward—demonstrating an impressive ability to interact, coordinate, and build relationships across diverse backgrounds...”

5. Key insights and future directions

The impact assessment results highlight the degree to which the DIALECT3 project affected both PE teachers and students. Despite initial difficulties such as existing stereotypes, time constraints, and resistance to ‘new’ rules, the outcomes seem to be changing positively toward inclusivity, collaboration, and social awareness in an educational setting.

The intervention has particularly enhanced PE teachers’ development by acquiring innovative tools to address diversity and inclusion regarding anti-discrimination. The football3 approach, despite time constraints plus structural constraints, suggested a pedagogical shift from competition to cooperation which in turn implies the necessity of curriculum readjustments to implement this pedagogic approach.

The project further encourages teamwork among students, respect, and social cohesion. Although, initially there was bias

based on gender and ability, it progressively improved leading to more inclusive participation. The use of mixed teams and mediator roles improved conflict resolution skills and strengthened students' sense of belonging. Notably, gender relations evolved, with females becoming more participative and males being more supportive. However, some challenges remain; PE teachers reported the persistence of ability-based exclusion, while the sustainability of the intervention relies on continued training, structured implementation, and institutional support.

The further potential of its long-term impact is through the expansion of the football3 methodology on primary education and integration into teacher training programmes, enhancing thus the intervention's long-term impact. Since, it has shown impact for the use of sport-based pedagogical interventions in teamwork, inclusivity and resilience, efforts should focus towards this direction ensuring lasting improvements in PE education.

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